

USING POPULAR SONGS TO LEARN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Music and songs are a part of our lives. They are played over the radio, on television and in shopping complexes. The effects of music upon learning English as a second language seem positive but are not entirely understood. The aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions of 70 English Language Learners on using songs to learn English. Data is collected using a questionnaire. Findings revealed that learners view using music as a motivating and interesting way of learning English. In conclusion, the songs are powerful tools to help learners acquire a second language.

KEYWORDS: ESL, Songs, Language Learning, Language Acquisition, Pronunciation & Creative Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language can be an intimidating task, however, it can be an interesting experience if language learning is done creatively. In the era of modern technology, one of the most interesting ways to learn a language is by using songs. The use of songs may provide a more comfortable and motivating learning environment for struggling language learners. Additionally, singing in a foreign language may help increase the ability of learners to speak the language and pronounce the words correctly.

SING SONG LANGUAGE

Murphey (2000) claimed that there is a similarity in singing to what Piaget (1923) called egocentric language. Egocentric language is defined as talk by children without the concern for an addressee. Children, according to Piaget, simply love hearing themselves repeat. They repeat what their parents say, they repeat advertisement jingles, and they repeat whatever they hear. Murphey draws from Piaget's findings and believes that the need for egocentric language never leaves us and we find fulfilment for this need in songs.

In addition to that, mothers have been found to speak using sing song language with their babies. This is the language spoken at a much slower rate and with more exaggerated intonation. Materials on the sing-song language that mothers use on infants has been found to have a vital role in children's acquisition of language. This seems to be so due to the affective aspect of motherese. Wallon (1995) discovered that motherese is not only highly affective but shares similar features with songs. Motherese contains highly repetitive vocabulary and is full of short simple structures such as "ga..ga..gu..gu..coo..coo".

In teenagers, Murphey claims that songs seem to replace the role of motherese. Murphey and Alber (1985) called songs as the 'adolescent motherese'. They wrote that when children reach adolescent or their teenage years, the amount of motherese talk they receive is reduced. Being teenagers, "their emotional systems are just beginning to bloom [and] their fascination with pop music may be seen as partly stemming from their need and

desire for [motherese] (Murphey, 1992 p.7). The songs are believed to provide the affective aspect that is much needed by teenagers. They are no longer babies where mothers talk to them in singsong language nor are they adults. Therefore, they fulfil their need for motherese in songs.

Apart from mothers, language teachers have also been found to use singsong language when teaching. Most of us are familiar with the intonation school children use when greeting their teachers. They sound more like a recorded song rather than a form of greeting. Where did this come from? A research by Carmen Fonseca Mora (1999) on the discourse of EFL teachers reported that teachers seem to unconsciously favour talking in a singsong manner. Her observation found that teachers do this when presenting new structures. In the same way as mothers expect their babies to answer them in a singsong manner, language teachers expect learners to repeat the same melody that they use when practicing a new structure.

Another example is the language that pre-school teachers use when telling or reading stories. Language teachers of young children are also found to practice reading stories aloud in singsong manners. This practice is reported to encourage young learners to acquire vocabulary and listening skills. It also provides the learners with a model for the target language.

Story songs have been found to be more effective in helping young children acquire a second language. One research by Medina (1993) on a group of 48 young ESL learners found a positive effect in the usage of music and songs in language learning. The research compared the amount of vocabulary acquired by children when listening to different rendition of a story. The story was sung, spoken, illustrated or not illustrated.

The findings revealed that the illustrated spoken and sung stories are both effective means of supporting language acquisition. However, close examination of the descriptive data revealed that the illustrated story song is a much better tool for language acquisition. Medina found that second language learners who listened to the illustrated sung stories acquired an average of 1.5 words by the end of the treatment, while those who heard the illustrated spoken version of the story acquired an average of 1.0 words. (Medina 1993)

MUSIC AND MEMORY

Apart from the fact that learners have been socialized from a very young age into learning language by means of singsong language, Murphey (1990) claimed that music could boost our memory. He mentioned the 'song-stuck-in-my-head' phenomena that reinforce the idea that music and songs work on our short and long term memory. Many of us have experienced this phenomenon where, for example, the last song that we listened to over the radio on our way to work seems to ring in our head throughout the day.

Not only does music and songs help in our memorization, they also seem to reinforce Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, students are able to learn better when their anxiety level is low. In other words, in order for students to be able to learn, the teacher must make sure that the students are relaxed and the environment conducive. Music and songs have the ability to make us feel relaxed and thus help in the learning of language. They do wonders to our emotions and are therapeutic. It is believed that when learners are relaxed and comfortable, their ability to concentrate, understand and absorbed what is learned increase.

An article by Eken (1996; p. 46) listed a number of reasons as to when and why songs can be used and one of them is the fact that songs provide a relaxed classroom environment. Lo and Li (1998) support this claim and suggest

songs that provide a change from the normal classroom routine. Students get to sing, dance or engage in Total Physical Response when learning using songs and music.

MUSIC AND SONGS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Past research has also found that song helps the development of language in young children (Murphey, 1990). Babies who are still in their mothers' wombs are reported to respond to music. This explains why child experts would often advise pregnant mothers to start talking to their babies even when the babies are still in their wombs.

A study by Mehler and Dupoux (1992) suggest that babies are able to distinguish their mother tongue by its intonation and rhythmic properties. Babies were found to show response when they hear people speaking their mother tongue. This study reported that babies kick in their mother's womb when they hear the familiar tone of their mother tongue. It is claimed that this is the first thing that babies learned when acquiring language.

Research also suggests that songs can help students to acquire a foreign language. Song lyrics are repetitive, the language is simple and easily remembered. For example, "Sailing" by Rod Stewart can provide students with opportunities to practise the present continuous tense. "I Have A Dream" by Westlife gives students the chance to learn subject-verb agreement.

Even more fascinating is the fact that one doesn't need to understand the language in order to be able to memorise the words of a song. The current craze for Korean and Filipino dramas, Spanish soap operas, and Hindi movies in Malaysia is a clear example of this. Children as young as three years old can sing in Korean, Filipino, Hindi or Spanish songs, even though they do not understand a word of it. This adds to the fact that the repetitive nature of songs aids in the memorisation of language structures.

Music and songs also enhance learners' vocabulary as well as listening and pronunciation skills. A research by Murphey (1992) confirms this. He reported that songs could aid in the students' acquisition of another language because they consist of short, repeated words. Along with that, song structures are often repeated making it easy to remember.

Words or lyrics of songs are spoken at a much slower pace if compared to the spoken discourse. The benefit of this is that it helps learners to understand and relate to the songs (Murphey 1992). They are comprehensible and songs that use simple vocabularies reinforces Krashen's Input Hypothesis for weak learners. Teachers can choose songs that are slightly above students' present proficiency level. This will ensure that they are able to understand the language but are also faced with enough challenge to improve their proficiency.

Another finding by Schoepp (2001) in his article "Reasons for Using Songs in the EFL/ESL Classroom" assert that the songs are good for teaching English due to the presence of everyday words in them. He argues that most of what students will listen to in everyday life will be informal English. The songs provide an avenue for that because they are filled with informal language. Schoepp included Bruce Springsteen song, "My Best was Never Good Enough" as an example where he claims that the song is loaded with colloquial language and phrases like "Every cloud has a silver lining".

Batluk (2015) found that students in her study viewed listening to music as assisting their English language acquisition. According to Batluk, "A majority of the students had the intrinsic motivation for learning as they exhibited curiosity, emotions and internal needs as the primary factors that empowered them to expand their extramural English. The minority of the interviewees showed signs of extrinsic motivation to learn the vocabulary of the lyrics of the songs they

listened to. The learning they experienced was linked to the expectancy in improving their academic performances”.

No doubt, exposure to authentic sources of English is very important. In Malaysia, especially the rural areas, authentic sources such as books, newspapers and materials are often hard to find but radios and music players are easily available and this means learners have the opportunity to hear authentic language through music.

Past research and evidence from classroom experiences of Language teachers around the world suggest that songs and music are powerful tools for promoting language learning. The evidence of many students' interest in music and songs appears to support this claim too. With regard to that, the current study will focus on how songs and music can help students enhance their English proficiency, specifically Listening skills.

It is very difficult to focus on listening alone without involving reading, writing, speaking, as all these skills are also indirectly involved. However, listening contributes to sixty percent of the syllabus. The emphasis on listening will limit this current study in this area. The current study is also limited to how the incorporation of songs and music can bring about change in the researchers' classroom. It is hoped that this small investigation into this area will provide insights and understanding into students' learning and the researchers' practice as ESL instructors.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is

- What are the English Language learners' perceptions of using songs to learn English?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed method approach. Participants of the study are 60 first year Diploma students. 12 of the participants are male, while 48 are female. The participants were selected using convenience sampling. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire and a semi formal interview. The data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated the influence of songs in learning a second language. The participants of the study are 60 First year Diploma students of Universiti Teknologi MARA. 12 of the learners are Male and 48 are female. They are a mixed of proficient and weak learners and were chosen based on convenience sampling. The table below shows the results to the research objective.

Table 1: English Language Learners Perceptions of Using Songs to Learn English

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
English Listening skills improved by listening to English songs.	92%	8%	0	0	0
Learning English through English songs makes lessons more interesting.	66%	18%	16%	0	0
Learning English by using English songs makes listening in English seems easier.	70%	22%	8%	0	0
I prefer to learn the language using English songs.	35%	40%	20%	5%	0
I like spending personal time to listen to English songs as a way to learn independently	20%	18%	31%	15%	16%
Listening to English songs does not help my English pronunciation	0	0	7.1	0	94.3

Listening to English songs helps me to understand English grammar	45.7	30	18.6	0	0
I prefer to learn vocabulary through songs.	58%	18.8%	18.8%	2.9%	1.4%
I am very interested to learn English through songs	25.4	50.8	16.9	1.7	5.1

The results are presented in the next section. In general, the findings support findings from previous research in the field. Based on the survey, 98.6% of the respondents believed that their English Listening skills improved by listening to English songs while 30% strongly agree that learning English through English songs makes lessons more interesting. When interviewed, students justified their answers by saying;

S5: Because it's so easy to understand. We can remember the lyrics

S37: Songs are fun, and when there is fun, learning feels faster and easier...and we can sing along and learn how to pronounce words.

The majority of the participants (92 %) also agree that songs make learning a second language seems easier. However, only 75% agree that they prefer to learn the language using English songs. When asked why, participants reported that learning English through English songs is fun and motivating, nevertheless they feel that learning to listen in English should not be limited to just listening to English songs.

S 33: sometime, I can do it but at the same time I can't understand the meaning of the words..haha

In terms of spending personal time to listen to English songs as a way to learn independently, 78% agree that it is a good way to learn to listen in English independently. Meanwhile, 66% of the respondents believed that listening to English songs helps them to improve their English vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation as well as grammar especially subject verb agreement when speaking in English. The remaining 34% reported that some of the songs are difficult to understand, therefore, they find that it does not improve their vocabulary.

S19: I can learn to pronounce new words on my own and I don't have to wait for the teacher to teach in class.

S56: Songs helps me to say words confidently because I say it by singing first. When I sing, I don't feel shy to say words wrongly.

In general, it can be concluded that English Language learners view learning English by using songs positively. Furthermore, learners find songs aid in the expansion of their vocabulary, improves their grammar knowledge, and creates interest. The songs are also found to encourage independent learning as it can be listened to at anytime and anywhere.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study looked at the students' perception of using English songs to learn English. As English language learners often find listening to English materials and texts difficult, the study proposed using English songs to teach listening skills. It is found that the majority of the respondents are in favour of using English songs to learn the language. Respondents also claimed that songs help them remember words and grammar. Moreover, the songs are proven to provide a relaxed environment for learners to learn the language. We can conclude that English songs provide motivation and a comfortable atmosphere for learners to learn the language. It is hoped that this paper may help English language teachers and instructors to create a more systematic and effective to use songs in English language classes in order to provide learners with lessons that are motivating and meaningful.

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